APOLITICS, INFORMATION, MOBILIZATION

MIHÁLY SZILÁGYI-GÁL

ELTE University of Sciences, Budapest
szilagyi-gal.mihaly@btk.elte.hu

Mihály Szilágyi-Gál. Apolitics, Information, Mobilization

Abstract: The relationship between political attitude, information and mobilization deserves research attention. In the present attempt of typology whereas the joint presence of low media diversity and strong personal criteria of interpreting news corelates to high degree of mobilization, the joint presence of a highly diverse media environment and the poor personal criteria of interpreting news corelates to a low degree of mobilization.

Keywords: apolitical, information, radicalization, mobilization, media environment, news

The relationship between political orientation, information and mobilization respectively radicalization deserves research attention. This lecture presents definitions of politics and apolitics and revisits an already existing model with the scholarship and with a proposed interpretation. Accordingly, four types of possible cases can be distinguished on the relationship from above: 1. The individual possesses strong personal criteria of interpreting news and lives in a diverse information (media and social) environment. 2. The individual does not possess strong personal criteria of interpreting news, but lives in a diverse information environment. 3. The individual possesses strong personal criteria of interpreting news, but lives in an information environment of low diversity. 4. The individual does not possess strong personal criteria of interpreting news and lives in an information environment of low diversity. According to this typology whereas the joint presence of low information diversity and strong personal criteria of interpreting news correlates with high degree of mobilization (participation), the joint presence of a highly diverse information environment and the poor personal criteria of interpreting news correlates with a low degree of mobilization.

The political impact of apolitical attitudes can be detected in the high significance of the hesitant voters during election campaigns for decades. Apolitical

attitudes are also important in the development of alternative political movements[1]. Similarly, in case of a major loss of electoral support of both the governmental and the oppositional side, critically apolitical agendas may become more important than any agenda offered by the party spectrum. Surveys testify the potential of apolitical masses in the emerging of radicalism[2]. These phenomena indicate that apolitical attitudes are part of the overall political landscape.

Given the two-decade-long trend of the correlation between political orientation, news consumption and participation[3], the relationship between apolitical orientation, information and mobilization[4] appears as a lasting topic of research. This implies the broader quest of the relationship between attitudes of denial, mobilization and action, possibly useful for researches in political science as well as in social communication of broader import. After an overview of some of the definitions of apolitics, I attempt to offer a model of mapping this relationship as a tool for further researches.

Brian McNair subscribes to a definition of political communication as society-wide deliberation on the redistribution of goods and sanctions[5]. By addressing the aspect of redistribution, McNair partly follows Max Weber's definition of political action as follows: "Social action, especially organized action, will be spoken of as 'politically oriented' if it aims at exerting influence on the government of a political organization; especially at the appropriation, expropriation, redistribution or allocation of the powers of government"[6]. Kenski and Jameison stress one of the understandings of politics as producing and reproducing shared meanings[7].

In his work Antipolitics, George Konrad distinguishes between antipolitics – as the civic rejection of the politics embedded in the core institutions of the state (regime or establishment) and apolitics – as the indifference toward politics as such[8]. Konrad describes antipolitics as a politically unbiased civic attitude which seeks distance

---

[1] JAMES M. Jasper distinguishes between three key factors behind any act of social resistance: 1. the alteration of the options offered by the political environment; 2. the level of organization of a particular movement; 3. the positive perspectives of the given community. This classification corresponds to the present interpretation of reflective apoliticism as a potential in the emerging of movements. Jasper, p. 34

[2] 2 RECKWITZ, p. 275

[3] Coleman and Blumler address the problem of citizen participation and its misuse by institutionalized politics in multiple ways. They rely primarily on British data. Kunczik highlights that the interest toward politics declines together with the trust toward the media. Coleman – Blumler: 2009, pp. 1-14; Kunczik: 2001, p. 77

[4] I use the term mobilization in exchange to participation.

[5] McNAIR, p. 3. He quotes from Robert E.Denton, Jr. and Gary C. Woodward: Political communication in America. New York: Praeger, *1990*

[6] WEBER, p. 54

[7] KENSKI and JAMEISON, p. 4

[8] KONRAD, pp. 227-233

from the establishment and protection of one's own private life against politics[9]. He distinguishes this from the apolitical attitude, by which he understands general indifference toward politics.

Barry Hindess puts forward a distinction which is similar to Konrad's. Accordingly, no universal typology of the concept of the apolitical is possible, because all its understandings are only meaningful in relation to some specific understanding of the concept of the political. He describes both orientations as suitable for a more or less autonomous range of action of a community, from which he deduces that apolitics and politics always appear in a mutually meaningful relation[10]. The present analysis tends to follow the line offered by Hindess, by emphasizing the necessary correspondence between any specific understanding of politics, on the one hand, and an understanding of apolitics as related to it, on the other hand.

Andreas Schedler offers a typology which is more detailed than those of both Konrad and Hindess. He distinguishes between four types of these which describe the nature of what in his vocabulary is equivalent to the antipolitical: 1. instead of collective issues, the thesis identifies some self-orienting order; 2. instead of plurality, it identifies uniformity; 3. instead of accidentalism, it identifies necessity; 4. instead of political power, it identifies individual liberty. According to Schedler, each eliminates one fundamental political aspect: 1. the recognition of the interdependence among the individuals of a community by the constituting individuals themselves; 2. the recognition of the plurality of the constituting individuals; 3. their capacity for joint action; 4. the possibility of the acceptance of a common rule. Schedler links the private sphere to the apolitical and the public to the political one, and claims that the primary code of politics always emerges from the opposition between the private and the public[11]. He describes the apolitical as non-cooperative and the political as cooperative enterprise.

Taking into account the above approaches on the meaning of apolitics, I address the apolitical as a fundamentally negative attitude. Whereas Konrad may be helpful in distinguishing between the critical anti-establishment and the overall indifferent versions of the apolitical, Hindess and Schedler highlight the interactive nature of the apolitical as being always in relation to what counts as political. In Konrad's understanding whereas antipolitical means the rejection of the officially recognized forms of what is political, apolitics means general passivity toward politics as a pursuit.

By taking the above understandings of politics and apolitics into consideration, it can be inferred that indifferent apolitics could be reasonably

---

[9] Zizek argues in a similar fashion. Zizek, p. 12
[10] HINDESS, pp. 21, 23
[11] SCHEDLER, pp. 3-4

understood as lack of interest towards the distribution of power, or else, as an alternative way of interpreting and debating issues related to the distribution of power. Another reasonable way to view apolitics would be as production or reproduction of negative attitudes toward politics. A closer look at the structuring of levels of interest and engagement (political and apolitical attitudes) is offered by Robert Huckfeldt, Paul E. Johnson and John Sprague. Their description is a step toward the modeling of apolitical attitudes which I am going to revisit.

In their volume Political Disagreement, the three authors attempt to detect systematic relationship between disagreement and political or civic engagement. They offer criteria which are useful both for the empirical and conceptual understanding of apolitics. One of their concluding passages deserves to be quoted at length:

"Taken together, it would seem to imply that citizens who encounter politically diverse messages are more likely to hold intense but balanced (or ambivalent) views regarding politics and political candidates, and they are less likely to hold intense and polarized (or partisan) views. For these purposes we can think in terms of three ideal types – the disengaged citizens who are unable to provide justification for their attitudes regarding the candidates; the intense and polarized citizens (the partisans) who are only able to provide reasons for liking one candidate and disliking the other; and the intense and balanced citizens (the ambivalent citizens) who are able to provide both likes and dislikes regarding the candidates. Small and politically sparse networks of communication are likely to yield the low intensity citizen; large homogenous networks are likely to yield the intensely partisan citizen; and large diverse networks are likely to yield the intensely ambivalent citizen"[12].

The above model is an ideal type of major patterns. The actual outcome of the ratio between diversity of sources and citizen attitude could be seen in light of further factors as well. Stroud stresses that even uncongenial information may re-enforce one's original conviction.[13] Her statement is that the actual impact of selective exposure may be nuanced by one's commitment to particular sources, by the intensity of accidental exposure, by the utility of some particular source or information, as well as by the environment of the reception.[14] She concludes that the selective exposure is not simply the dissemination of the information shared by congenials, but the clear preference for that information[15].

Another interpretation can also help us to further nuance Huckfeld, Johnson and Sprague's model, according to which altough the more informed citizen

---

[12] HUCKFELDT, Johnson, Sprague, pp. 212-214
[13] STROUD, p. 531
[14] STROUD, ibidem, p. 531
[15] STROUD, p. 539

displays more interest toward participation, there is no clear evidence of whether more political knowledge implies more interest for participation, or the motivation for participation leads to demand more political knowledge[16].

Finally in the research of the relationship between information and political attitude the activity of online platforms cannot be disregarded. There is evidence that the specifically hectic nature of online interactions makes accurate selection of politically relevant manifestations difficult. What hinders the identification of political contents on platforms is not their possible bias, but the fact that many of them cannot be considered as clear deliberations a fact, which is re-enforced by the constantly changing structures of interaction in the new media. Therefore it is relevant to pay attention primarily to the off-line patterns of the relationship between information, political orientation and mobility[17].

The present approach partly relies upon Konblock-Westerwick and Johnson's results who had been researching the relationship between participation and political awareness already before the age of online communication. According to their findings the joint presence of frequent news consumption and the open mindedness of the related political orientation display a low degree of inclination toward mobilization. Contrary to this in case of the joint presence of low degree of interest toward news and of strong attitude-consistency, inclination toward mobilization tends to be high[18]. This is consistent with Cass R. Sunstein's observation on the significance of reflections in the quality of processing information, according to which, deliberation may enhance individual preconceptions, because it may increase the gratification of the members of discussion groups[19].

The present lecture suggests a model consisting of four types of possible cases in which the relationship from above may occur: 1. The individual possesses strong personal criteria of interpreting news and lives in a diverse information environment. 2. The individual does not possess strong personal criteria of interpreting news, but lives in a diverse information environment. 3. The individual possesses strong personal criteria of interpreting news, but lives in an information environment of low diversity. 4. The individual does not possess strong personal criteria of interpreting news and lives in an information environment of low diversity. According to this typology whereas the joint presence of low information diversity and strong personal criteria of interpreting news correlates with high degree of mobilization, the joint presence of a highly diverse information environment and the poor personal criteria of interpreting news correlates with a low degree of mobilization.

---

[16] EVELAND, Garrett, R. Kelly, pp. 2017, 517, 521
[17] STROMER-Galley, pp. 43, 45, 46
[18] KNOBLOCH-Westerwick and Johnson,pp. 343–364
[19] SUNSTEIN, pp. 78-79

According to this model the stronger personal news interpreting criteria exist in an information environment of low diversity, the higher the degree of individual mobilization (and possibly of radicalization).[20] Contrary to this the weaker the system of personal news interpreting criteria correlates with a highly diverse environment, the lower may be the degree of individual mobilization. Between the two extremes the individual in a highly diverse environment, but without personal news interpreting criteria will be closer to a higher degree of mobilization respectively, the individual in a highly diverse environment, but with low degree of personal news interpreting criteria will be closer to a lower degree of mobilization.

In other words, the poorer interpretation of reality correlates with poor personal interest – or value selecting criteria, the higher the apolitical attitude, because the poorer the reflective, critical perspective of interpreting the environment. This scale is diametrically opposed to the simultaneous presence of strong personal selection criteria and rich information environment, because these two enable a strong, reflective, critical perspective.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BLUMLER, Jay G. – COLEMAN, Stephen: The Internet and Democratic Citizenship. Theory, Practice and Policy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009, 2010
EVELAND, William P. Jr. and Garrett, R. Kelly: "Communication Modalities and Political Knowledge" in: (ed. by Kate Kenski, Kathleen Hall Jamieson): The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. pp. 517-530
HALL JAMEISON, Kathleen and KENSKI, Kate: "Political Communication: Then, Now, and Beyond" in: (ed. by Kate Kenski, Kathleen Hall Jamieson): The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. pp. 3-11
HINDESS, Barry: "Antipolitical Motifs in Western Political Discourse" in: (ed. by Andreas Schedler): The end of politics?: explorations into modern antipolitics. Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1996. pp. 21-39
HUCKFELD, Robert, JOHNSON, Paul E., SPRAGUE, John: Political Disagreement. The Survival of Diverse Opinions within Communication Networks. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. pp. 212-214
KONRAD, George: Antipolitics: an essay. London, Melbourne, New York: Quartet Books, 1984
KUNCZIK, Michael: "Media and Democracy: "Are Western Concepts of Press Freedom Applicable in New Democracies?" in: (ed. by Péter Bajomi-Lázár, István Hegedűs): Media and Politics. Budapest: Új Mandátum, 2001. pp. 59-93
RECKWITZ, Andreas: Das Ende der Illusionen. Politik, Ökonomie und Kultur in der Spätmoderne. Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2019
SCHEDLER, Andreas: "Intoduction" in: The end of politics?: explorations into modern antipolitics. Hampshire: MacMillan Press, 1996. pp. 1-20

---

[20] Reckwitz highlights that the gradual shrinking of the traditional middle-class and working class in the West since the 1980s onwards started to push these groups in the 2000s partly toward apolitical, partly toward far-right attitudes. Reckwitz, ibid. pp. 106, 128

STROMER-GALLEY, Jennifer: "Political Discussion and Deliberation Online" in: (ed. by Kate Kenski, Kathleen Hall Jamieson): The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. pp. 837-850

STROUD, Natalie Jomini: "Selective Exposure Theories" in: (ed. by Kate Kenski, Kathleen Hall Jamieson): The Oxford Handbook of Political Communication. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. pp. 531-547

SUNSTEIN R., Cass: Infotopia – How many minds produce knowledge. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006

WEBER, Max: Gazdaság és társadalom. A megértő szociológia alapvonalai 1. Ford. Erdélyi Ágnes. Budapest: Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, 1987

WESTERWICK, Axel, JONHNSON, Benjamin K. & KNOBLOCH-WESTERWICK, Silvia, 2017: Confirmation biases in selective exposure to political online information: Source bias vs. content bias. Communication Monographs, vol. 84, no. 3, pp. 343–364